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C O N F I D E N T I A L TEGUCIGALPA 001642

SIPDIS

STATE FOR WHA/CEN, INR/B, DRL/IRF,

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KJUS](#) [PHUM](#) [HO](#) [VA](#)

SUBJECT: A LATIN AMERICAN POPE? CARDINAL RODRIGUEZ DEEMED
PAPABLE, SPECULATION MAY AID HIS ANTI-CORRUPTION CAMPAIGN

REF: A. TEGUCIGALPA 625

[B](#). TEGUCIGALPA 1534

[C](#). VATICAN 4582

Classified By: Political Section Chief, Francisco L. Palmieri; Reasons
1.5(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (U) Summary. Pope John Paul II's increasing frailty has prompted discussion over potential successors to the papacy, among which experts have identified Cardinal Oscar Andres Maradiaga Rodriguez of Honduras as both a popular and geographically strategic candidate. Despite the Euro-centric tradition of the papacy, some Vatican experts believe that the next pontiff may, in fact, be a Latin American. Cardinal Rodriguez, Archbishop of Tegucigalpa is viewed as a strong choice among Latin American cardinals eligible for the position, both for his insider connections and international reputation as a champion of social justice and political transparency in his home country of Honduras. In Honduras, because of this status, the media pays special attention to his public pronouncements. End Summary.

Latin America: The Church's Fastest Growing Constituency

[1](#)2. (SBU) While European and American church membership has sharply declined in recent years, the developing world (and Latin America, in particular) has experienced the opposite trend. Today, home to more than half of the world's Catholics, Latin America has increasingly emerged as the new face of Catholicism in the 21st century. Reflecting the rapid increase in church membership, the region is now represented by a powerful 22-Cardinal voting electorate for the papacy, which is the second largest regional voting block (next to Europe).

[1](#)3. (SBU) In addition to Cardinal Rodriguez, other strong candidates from the region identified in REFTel C and by the media include: Dario Catrillon Hoyos (74) of Colombia; Jorge Mario Bergoglio (66) of Argentina; Claudio Hummes (68) of Brazil; Norberto Rivera Carrera (61) of Mexico; and Alfonso Lopez Trujillo (67) of Colombia. While many experts believe Rodriguez to be among the top few potential candidates, some have also indicated that the Cardinal's relative youth, at 60 years of age, may prove a potential obstacle among an older voting electorate. Additionally, the Cardinal's health is not 100 percent. He allegedly suffers from diabetes, for which he apparently spent a month in a German hospital last fall. Also, his life has been threatened repeatedly in Honduras. (See REFTel A.)

Speculation Draws Greater Attention to the Cardinal's Battles

[1](#)4. (C) Comment. Even though the timeframe for the next papal election is indeterminable, widespread media speculation among experts and the press regarding Cardinal Rodriguez's potential candidacy has nonetheless had an impact. Voted the third most powerful public figure in Honduras (behind President Maduro and the Ambassador) earlier this year, the Cardinal has been featured even more prominently in the press recently. Should the Cardinal emerge publicly as a contender for the papacy in the coming months, his high profile campaigns will likely receive increased moral and political weight. Given the close relationship between the Ambassador and Cardinal Rodriguez, the Cardinal's popular moral authority represents an increased opportunity to rally additional Honduran support for many of our shared priorities, including fighting narco-corruption, violence and poverty. At the same time, it is important to note that the Cardinal has, at times, criticized several U.S. policies, such as the War in Iraq, CAFTA, and the level of international assistance to the developing world. End Comment.
Palmer